THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

LOVE IN PRIME TIME

February 28, 1999
John M. Buchanan

What, after all, is the end of this endeavor? Is it that we should analyze a question to our satisfaction, provide an answer that ties everything together, and go off shopping or playing golf, secure in a good little job well done? Is not a book about Jesus merely a step toward something far more important? Is not the ultimate aim that we should come face-to-face with the one in whose face we see the face of the creator God, the one who loves us more than we can ever guess? Is it not that we should be transformed by that meeting so that we can share that same love with the world around? Books about Jesus can be an aid. . . . But if it is Jesus we are talking about, worship and mission are more important.

N.T. Wright
The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions
with Marcus J. Borg

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Genesis 12:1-5a
John 3:1-17

Dear God, out of the relentless noisiness of life we come here to put ourselves in hearing distance of your word. We come because in many ways over the years you have come to us; in the beauty of the world, in the gifts of music and art, in the love of our dearest ones. So now startle us once again, speak the word you have for us today and give us the courage to hear and respond and follow, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (NRSV)

The MacArthur Foundation made big news last week by releasing the results of a ten-year study on mid-life, or middle age, a topic of accelerating relevance for most, if not all, of us. The report confirmed what we know, namely, that middle age is a relative term, a matter of perspective, with infinitely flexible parameters. Something mysterious happens along the way of our pilgrimage. When we were youngsters, people our age seemed old. But no more. We understand what Martin Marty experiences when he looks in a mirror, as he is sprinting by on his way to three or four meetings and lectures in a day that began at his desk at 6:00 a.m., and will end on a transcontinental flight in the evening, and wonders who that old fellow is looking back at him.

The MacArthur Foundation confirmed that middle age is whatever we want it to be, and wherever we want it to be, and, interestingly, most people feel pretty good about it. That's not what we were told 20 years ago, when mid-life crisis was all the rage. And, obviously, mid-life is a time of crisis for many, a time when the end of life is closer than the beginning, and so some inevitable evaluation and change takes place, sometimes traumatically and tragically, sometimes creatively and hopefully. By and large, men and women are satisfied with middle-age; content with life in general, what they are doing with it, and where it is headed. Life for middle-aged Americans is not exactly settled, however. Americans now can expect to have multiple jobs—two, three, four careers—before retirement. In fact, for many, the notion of retirement has been redefined.

So I am particularly alert to stories in our tradition about middle-aged people in crisis, in transition. I'd like to visit three of them this morning: Abraham and Sarah, back on the very edge of recorded history, and later, just 2,000 years ago, an intriguing man by the name of Nicodemus.

Abraham and Sarah are old. I include them for two reasons. When we meet them, the most important part of their lives lies ahead of them, in the future, and because the MacArthur Foundation report allows me considerable flexibility in defining middle age, Abraham is 75, but he is just getting started and he has a long way to go.

Settled, stable, loving their routine, no children, life is predictable, comfortable, good—just like the MacArthur Foundation said it is. Can you imagine what it was like on the day Abraham and Sarah tell their neighbors that they're having a garage sale, putting their place on the market, packing up and moving—because God told them to? In the ancient world, the accumulation of wealth allowed a man to stay in one place instead of a life of constant wandering. Life's goal was not to have to pack up and move anymore, ever. So can you imagine when old Abraham tried to explain why he was walking away from the comfort and stability and security he had built to go to some God-forsaken place, not having any idea what he would do when he got there, because he had it in his mind that God was calling him? Can you imagine Sarah trying to explain to her friends how she was exchanging her comfortable routine—her friendship and kinship and community, everything that was sweet about her life for the risk and discomfort and loneliness of life in the wilderness, wandering around, looking for God's promised land?

The story of Sarah and Abraham is important for what it tells us about God and about faith and faithfulness. Jewish and Christian people know Abraham and Sarah as the parents of our faith traditions. It all began with them, when they hear God's call and get up and move. When St. Paul is trying to explain what belief in Jesus Christ means, he uses Abraham and Sarah as examples. Abraham, Paul says, was a righteous man (Romans 4:3), a man of exemplary faithfulness, not because he was a great theologian or a paragon of moral virtue. He was neither. In fact, Abraham was capable of appallingly immoral behavior. Shortly after they pick up and move away from Haran, they find themselves in Egypt looking for food. Sarah is an attractive woman who catches Pharaoh's eye. Abraham senses the danger to himself posed by the awkward situation, and resolves it by calling Sarah his sister and allowing her to join Pharaoh's harem. Pharaoh turns out to be more decent than Abraham. When he discovers the truth, he returns Sarah to her husband and scolds Abraham.

In any event, Abraham does not get to be called righteous by way of his morality. He is not faithful because of the scope and orthodoxy of his theology. Abraham and Sarah are the righteous and faithful mother and father of us all because one day they hear God's call and listen and obey and take a monumental risk and open their hands and let go of everything they had earned and accumulated and upon which they were totally dependent for their self-image and their future security, and place their future, however much or little there was left of it, in God's hands.

That, the Bible says, is what faith is. That is what the new life in Jesus Christ looks like, what being "born again," to use a troubled-but-important phrase, looks like.

But first, let's visit our third MacArthur Foundation subject, a man in full, prime time, a community leader, a respected official in his religion, a man who is enjoying everything he has accomplished, his place in the community. Nicodemus comes to see a young rabbi from Nazareth at night. Biblical scholars tell us that the Gospel of John, in which this story occurs, uses a lot of symbolism and opaque language with double meaning, and that Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night is a way of saying that in the darkness of human history he was seeking the light of the world. But it may also have been because he didn't want anybody to see him. He was embarrassed, this substantial, respected, powerful, middle-aged man to be seen, talking to, visiting with, inquiring of Jesus of Nazareth.

The conversation is tortured. " Rabbi—you must be someone very important because of all these wonderful acts you are performing—to turn water into wine. No one could do that without supernatural power."

Jesus' answer is a *non sequitur*: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, or born again."

And now, we learn something interesting about Nicodemus. Not only is he middle-aged, secure, settled, and respected. He doesn't have much imagination, which, come to think of it, is part of what happens sometimes on the way to becoming secure, settled, and middle-aged. In any event, Nicodemus doesn't recognize a good metaphor when he stumbles over it.

"How can anyone be born after having grown old?"

The Greek word, by the way, *anothen*, can be translated either "born from above" or "born again."

Frederick Buechner has a little fun with Nicodemus' literalism, and has him ask, "Just how are you supposed to pull a thing like that off when you are pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb when it was all that he could do to enter a taxi without the driver coming around to give him a shove from behind?" (*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 122).

Nicodemus defines faith as keeping the law. He's an expert at it. You live up to God's expectations by living a good, pure, moral life. And he can't see the new reality in front of his eyes, can't give himself to newness and hopefulness. "Are you a teacher and you cannot understand?" Jesus asks him.

And then John, writing this all down, adds an editorial comment, does a little preaching.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

The Gospel in miniature, Martin Luther called that single sentence.

Nicodemus hears the same word that came to Abraham and Sarah. God is infinitely more than you can imagine. God is infinitely more than your religious systems and institutions. Because of that you have to rethink everything. God cares about the law and your morality, but God wants more from you than that. God wants you to live fully and joyfully and faithfully. God has something in mind for you, and sometimes to realize that, to claim it, to live it, you have to do something risky, something outrageous, something very brave, like selling the place and heading out for the promised land, or coming to see Jesus under the cover of darkness.

God loves the world with passionate abandon, with utter commitment, and wants more than anything for you and me to know that, to let that amazing news change the way we think about the world—God's beloved, about other people—God's children, about

yourself—loved forever by God; and to re-create us, so that there is no better way to describe it than rebirth. That's what happened to Abraham and Sarah. And it happened to Nicodemus , too—gradually—which is also, I believe, the way it happens mostly.

"Are you born again?" is a terrifying question for most Presbyterians. Richard Lischer, a Lutheran and a distinguished scholar and professor at Emory University, writes that, "One of the disadvantages of being a Lutheran is that you have so few good conversion stories. Those who tell their conversion stories with great gusto are automatically suspect in my denomination" (*The Christian Century*, 2/17/99).

The problem is that the perfectly good phrase, "born again," has been appropriated by those whose spiritual style is different from ours, and for them the phrase and what they mean by it has become a kind of litmus test to determine the authenticity of one's faith. "Are you born again?" sounds to many of us like, "I am but I don't think you are and you're in a lot of trouble." Furthermore, it has become a kind of ideological code word for Christian Coalition types. Richard Lischer tells about a student of his trying to make it in the Washington bureaucracy. He told his professor that "one way to begin is by getting into an influential prayer group. The password? 'Born again'" (*Ibid.*).

Peter Gomes is helpful when he writes, "What 'born again' means is literally to begin all over again, to be given a second chance. The one who is born again doesn't all of a sudden turn into a super Christian. To be born again is to enter afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to cancel your old mortgage and start again. 'You must be born again,' is an offer you can't afford to refuse" (*The Good Book*, p. 188).

It is not a threat. It's a promise. It's a gift. It comes to Abraham and Sarah and creates for them a whole new life, just when they had settled in and concluded that the best part of their lives was over. Now it's a matter of playing it out, waiting for the end. It comes to Nicodemus in the middle of the night, when he does something unconventional and risky and opens his heart and soul and life and future to something brand new.

It's a gift and comes because, as John put it, God so loves the world, doesn't condemn the world, but loves the world, a gift—offered to you and me; an invitation to live all the life we have been given; to live in all the glorious freedom of knowing that you are loved and that nothing will ever separate you from that love and that Jesus Christ is God's promise, God's assurance, God's love among us.

Abraham, Sarah, Nicodemus—the Bible, Gomes says, "is full of the companionship of the confused and seeking, men and women made of the most ordinary stuff who often fail to understand, who make mistakes, whose humanity is transparent, but who encounter the living God and whose lives are therefore changed" (*Ibid*).

How does it happen? Sometimes it happens when, like Abraham and Sarah, we take the enormous risk of following what we believe is God's call. Sometimes it happens when we go looking for Jesus, even if it's late at night and we're feeling a little foolish. And sometimes it happens because God forces the issue and comes into our lives with unexpected, life-giving love.

In the next to last chapter of her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells about a particularly difficult and sad day when everything was wrong, and all the news was bad, and life looked hopeless. A friend appears and invites her to go for a walk, which turns into a funny adventure, and in the middle of it Lamott reflects,

> "It's funny where we look for salvation and where we actually find it. . . . This is the most profound spiritual truth I know: that even when we're most sure that love can't conquer all, it seems to anyway. It goes down into the rat hole with us, in the guise of our friends and there it swells and comforts. It gives us second winds, third winds, hundredth winds. It struck me that I have spent so much time trying to pump my way into feeling the solace I used to feel in my parents' arms. But pumping always fails you in the end. The truth is that you don't rise up until you get way down—the mud, the bottom. But there someone enters that valley with you, that mud, and it saves you again" (p. 264).

Born again.

It may be God's summons to put the place up for sale, open your hands, let go of everything and walk into the wilderness with nothing much by way of certainty but God's love.

It may be God's summons to do something outrageous, like visiting Jesus at night, like joining the church, giving your love to a child, your money to a cause, giving your life away. . . .

And it may mean simply saying "yes" to the voice that has been calling you, prodding your conscience, compelling your love; saying "yes" to God's great love for you in Jesus Christ.

Born again. It's not a threat, its a promise; a gracious invitation from the one who gave you life . . . to listen, to hear, to let go, to follow.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Thanks be to God.

Amen